

A mother's story.

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BUILDING ON EACH OTHER'S STRENGTHS.

Cynthia McCurdy is a woman on a mission. Let the conversation turn to the subject of children's mental health and you'll quickly learn how one mother's frustration at not being able to find adequate services for her daughter turned into a personal crusade that is helping families and children beyond the boundaries of her Rexburg, Idaho, community.

What is a serious emotional disturbance (SED)?

SED includes a range of behavioral and emotional disorders severe enough to limit or interfere with a child's ability to function in the family, school, or community.

The transformation from caring mother to vocal advocate was not easy nor did it happen overnight. Cynthia and her husband, Brad, have always been involved in local causes relating to children and their well-being. Even with three children of their own at home, they managed to find the time and energy to serve as foster parents. They even spent time assisting the local chapter of the Make-A-Wish Foundation. But it was the birth of their

youngest daughter that changed their lives forever and personalized their commitment to helping children with mental health problems.

Turning from despair to hope

From birth she was different than the couple's other three children. But the family didn't understand how different she really was until she reached first grade. At the school's urging, she took a series of tests to determine her learning capacity. According to school officials, her test scores revealed she would never be able to learn to read or write, and the McCurdys were advised to take their daughter home and simply make her comfortable.

Unwilling or perhaps unable to accept such a limited future for their daughter, the couple made the decision to take her to a well-regarded children's hospital in Salt Lake City. It was there they learned she had Arnold Chiari, a malformation at the base of her brain. Although she underwent a surgical procedure to correct the malformation, she continued to have problems processing information about the world around her.

The McCurdys quickly learned the local public schools were ill equipped to provide for students like their daughter. Convinced that schools could and should be doing more, Cynthia took it upon herself to learn the laws relating to special education in Idaho. She was an apt student. Armed with

information and motivated by a mother's desire to see her child succeed, Cynthia was soon a familiar face at public hearings where the topics of special education and children's mental health were discussed.

However, Cynthia's involvement didn't stop there. For a time she worked with the Idaho chapter of the Federation of Families, a national family-support organization. When Idaho moved to a strength-based system-of-care approach to helping children with serious emotional disturbances (SED) Cynthia became involved with the local council that connects families with the programs and services available in their area. Later she was selected as the council chairperson for her region.

It takes everyone to make a difference

From the very beginning, Cynthia's mission has been a family affair. When asked about her other children and how they have felt about the time and attention dedicated to the youngest daughter, Cynthia replies with a smile: "The kids have been wonderful and supportive throughout. I even have a daughter who is pursuing a career in special education."

As tough as the battle has been, Cynthia and Brad know their daughter's life is far better today than it would have been had the family followed the advice of the school officials who conducted the first tests. Karissa, now preparing for middle

school, not only can read and write, but also can play piano, sing in her school choir, make presentations at her church, and when time allows even go snowboarding.

The McCurdy's daughter isn't the only one who has benefited from all the hard work. "She has taught me about love and life," says Cynthia. "I really believe these children have a sixth sense about who they are and where they are going." As far as coping is concerned, she concedes, "Every day is an adventure, and you're always looking for new coping skills." However, Cynthia sees it as a journey of sorts: "It's like you've waited all this time to go on vacation – your bags are packed, you get on the plane, and after a time in the air you find out the plane is never going to land. At first you're disappointed, but over time you learn to make the most from the situation."

When she is asked what the parents of children with SED can do, Cynthia is quick with her response: "Advocate for your child, and empower yourself as a parent. These children need families and communities that believe in them and speak out on their behalf. That's what it takes to make a difference." Cynthia McCurdy is certainly proof positive that families can make a difference for everyone.



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For more information about the Idaho System of Care and services and support available in your area, call the Idaho CareLine by dialing 211 or 1-800-926-2588.

You also can contact the Idaho Federation of Families, an Idaho-based support organization for families with children affected by SED, on the Web at www.idffcmh.org or by calling 1-800-905-3436.